

A Quest on Bayou Chicot

BY ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

A TINY trunk of ancient mien, packed with crumbling parchments, was my introduction to the extinct and all but forgotten family which was founded in America by Hyacinthe Beurnais, great-uncle of the first husband of that girl of Martinique whose charm and ambition eventually set her on the throne of France. The papers had a pathetic and romantic interest for me—an interest, indeed, which waxed so strong, as I continued to decipher and classify, that I was finally persuaded to try my hand on a “foot-note to history.” Of this foot-note, though, you have perhaps never heard.

In the beginning, the monograph entailed some drudgery; but as I warmed to my work I began to feel the thrill of the creator. The long-dead exiles to the reptilian wilderness of our Gulf coast seemed to shake off their grave-clothes, to take on again the hue of life, and to resume their manifold activities as lords and ladies of a new-world manor. Yet it was not until I stepped from the train at the little station of Nollychuckee, in Louisiana, and pressed my feet to earth which Hyacinthe Beurnais had acquired through a royal grant of the king of France, that this doughty cavalier and his sloe-eyed progeny, to the fourth generation, became real personages of the past.

Not that there was anything inspiring about Nollychuckee. It was merely a gash in a well-nigh trackless forest of live-oaks, gums, magnolias, and cypresses, with an unpleasantly suggestive number of buzzards wheeling in the hot blue overhead. Through the trees' mournful festoons of Spanish moss, stagnant water gleamed in every direction; and it was only after some scrutiny of the tangle of vegetation that I discovered the half-dozen scattered houses which comprise Nollychuckee. But one of these, so the bilious-looking station-agent informed

me, as he gnawed at a hunk of tobacco with his yellow teeth, was the home of Father René Berard.

It was this name which suddenly thronged the place with the ghosts of the past. For René Berard was a familiar name in my documents, and he had stood at the cradle, the bridal altar, and the grave of many a Beurnais. Yet, I reflected more soberly, if this Berard were *my* Berard, he could be not less than eighty-seven years old; and eighty-seven, it occurred to me, must be an age rarely attained in this sickly climate.

Nevertheless, as I walked up the flower-bordered, ground-shell walk to a cottage fairly sinking beneath a mound of vines and climbing roses, and glimpsed a wizened little man in a skull-cap, sitting in a secluded corner of his bower, my heart leaped. And when he came forward and extended his hand with that profound simplicity and serenity which few but those whose eyes are already turned from the things of this world ever acquire, I knew that he was *the* René Berard.

“The Beurnais!” he exclaimed, as if my word had waked him from a long trance. “Dead, *sieur*—all dead! The last one—Honoré—died July 5, 1857. I bury heem myself. I mean, *sieur*, with these, my own hands,” holding up the small, mummified members. “There was no other to do it. The servants had fly, and on the four day before hees death, hees four daughters had die. Hees wife, two week before. Hees mother, two day before that. Yellow fever, *sieur*. Ah, my heart broke that day! Yet I steel live; I steel cumber the earth which is my Father’s footstool.”

After his emotion had subsided, I explained my errand and spoke of my desire to see the Beurnais house.

“That can be easily arrange,” he answered, in his quaint patois. “I will gif you a letter to Gad Dirks. I myself could

not go, to be sure." He smiled apologetically. "I am too ole. The short way ees soon long to me, now. Again, I haf not seen the house, believe me, *sieur*, since the day Honoré die, on w'ich same day I bury heem. To haf seen it would be only pain. To me it ees a spot accurst. But 'tis a long time since that day. All ees desolate there now. Oh, my son, how transitory thing, how fleeting thing, ees wealth and power—yea, even human love and beauty!"

His ash-gray eyes filled and his ancient lips quivered. I turned my gaze from him to the solitary landscape. A low-flying crane, flapping laboriously, silhouetted itself against the western sky, which was still purple and orange from the vanished sun. The guttural call of a marsh hen drifted to my ears from across the morass. The frogs tuned their wet pipes—at first an individual voice here and there, as if giving the key, but rapidly swelling into a multiplex, resounding, all-pervading chorus. From an adjoining thicket came the weird repetitions of a whippoorwill.

It was essentially such a scene as Narvaez or de Soto, with his grim band of arquebusiers, might have paused to look upon three hundred years before, while he dreamed, through the priest's vespertine chant, of golden empires in that mysterious land beyond the Father of Waters. Yet, after all, he could have seen no hawk-moths hovering over a petunia bed; nor have heard a softly padding, generous-bosomed African mammy appear at a cottage door, shoo away the mosquitoes with her apron, and announce

in the mellifluous tones of her race: "Ole marse, de pullet smokin' on de table. Will de gemplum have a twitch o' mint in his bitters or teck 'em jess so?" And though many a thrilling tale was doubtless spun



"DEAD, SIEUR,—ALL DEAD!"

about the camp-fire of those hardy Spaniards, none could have surpassed in tragic and romantic interest René Berard's story, that night after supper, of the family of Beurnais.

I was on the way to Gad Dirks' by eight o'clock the next morning. Gad was the descendant of a line of overseers on the Beurnais plantation who, fattening on the crumbs from their rich master's

table, had been people of some importance in the countryside for three generations back. But Gad—a child at the time of the event—had suffered in both prestige and prosperity through the extinction of his family's patron. This much the little priest had hinted, but so delicately that I was entirely unprepared for the deterioration which I found.

After crossing a bayou on an oak-slab bridge whose perforations would have swallowed a calf, and floundering for five miles over a boggy runway in the jungle which Father Berard had innocently described as the "highway," I neared a warped, weather-beaten house of decidedly uninviting appearance. No trees shaded it, though tens of thousands grew within a rifle-shot, and it fairly crackled under the fierce Louisiana sun. As a protection against overflows, which here seemed to have a periodicity almost as constant as that of the moon, it was perched on piling at a height of four or five feet from the ground. A palisade of oak puncheons, strong enough to turn a herd of elephants, but softened by a mantle of wild scuppernong grape-vines, enclosed an acre or so of ground about the house. Inside this enclosure was as feeble an attempt at agriculture as one would be likely to see outside an Indian reservation—a few crooked rows of corn, a sickly patch of potatoes, a scattering of pumpkins, squashes, and cabbages, and a bed of tobacco.

Chained to one of the corner posts was a sour-visaged coon, who kept his beady eyes fixed upon a brace of sleeping hounds. Just above, on the front "gallery," in a rocking-chair patched with wire and lath, sat the gentleman I was looking for—a big muscular fellow of fifty or more, with thick, unkempt black hair falling to his shoulders. Without rising, he cordially hailed me in and waved me to another crippled chair.

"You will excuse me retainin' this rocker, Majeh," he observed, affably, with a copious ejaculation of tobacco juice over the rail. "Truth is, Majeh, it's the only cheer in the house that eases my rheumatiz. Our climate's a trifle damp—hellish damp, I might say—and theh's some rheumatiz hyarabouts. Thar's some fever and ager, too. But *that's* all damn nonsense. A thimbleful of licker now and

then 'll knock the ager galley west. By the way, Majeh, would you like a drap now, arfter your walk?"

I thought it best to assent, whereupon my host arose with considerable alacrity for a rheumatic and drew forth a jug and tin cup from behind the front door. Water, evidently, was not considered necessary.

I poured a fair drink.

"Pshaw, Majeh!" exclaimed Dirks. "What's the use of tantalizin' your irrigation canal thataway? What you got there won't wet your molars." When it came his turn, he poured the cup something over half full and tossed it off with practised celerity.

"We'll just leave the toddy sit hyar handy, case either of us should git thusty agin, or somebody else should drap in," he observed, capping the jug with the cup. "But as a rule I seldom take more'n one or two, possibly three, never over four, drinks befo' dinner—unless dinner is very late indeed."

At this point two strapping young women, barefooted and loose-gowned, yet rather comely, and with their sire's wealth of black hair, came out of the house—attracted by our voices, evidently. They eyed me boldly, not to say coquettishly, and then squatted on the steps, like children. Their father ignored them exactly as if they had been children.

"If it wa'n't fur one er two things, this would be the finest kentry on the globe," he rambled on. "We git a leetle too much water, some seasons, and there air, no doubt, an overplus of skeeters. Yit, arfter all, I couldn't be contented in a dry kentry; I'd swivel up like a chunk of fat in the fire. I don't know but as I'd miss the skeeters, too. I reckon they suve a puppose, though I'm damned if I kin say yit what it is. Then some people complain of the hawgs and cattle that run wild in the woods around hyar. But, goddlemighty, I call 'em a blessin'. 'Course, you've got to fence agin' 'em if you farm any, as you'll notice I do. But when you want pork or beef, all you got to do is take down your rifle and go git some. Same way with deer. Deer are dang near as thick around hyar as skeeters. If I git up airy enough, I kin sit right hyar on this gal'ry and plug one any time."



THE YOUNG WOMEN SQUATTED ON THE STEPS LIKE CHILDREN

One of the girls tittered at this. "Pap, your booze air shore goin' to your haid. You ain't shot a deer in three months."

Gad ignored the thrust and continued, placidly: "I kinder feared the railroad comin' thoo hyar would hurt the kentry. Thought it might bring in settlers and sich, and spile our huntin'. But it ain't, curus enough. It don't even seem to skeer the deer. They'll let a loc'motive git closter to 'em than a man."

At this juncture appeared two more big girls—black-haired, plump, uncorseted, with necks like a Venus's, and quite as free from shyness as their sisters. One of them, I suspected, had a quid of tobacco in her cheek, for she occasionally turned her head and spat furtively. Children of nature they were; yet I could not blink the fact that they were grown children, with a normal equipment, to say the least, of the attributes of their sex, and a voracious interest in a strange man.

Hence I could not ignore their presence with their father's ease, and in order to relieve the situation somewhat I observed:

"You have quite a family of girls, Mr. Dirks."

"Too many," he returned, tranquilly. "I wish I could marry some of 'em off. There's another one yit, but she stays in the kitchen and helps her mammy. *She's* a worker; and nachally, sich is the pure cussedness of things, she'll be the fust to go, though she's the baby. In fact, she's already got her feller picked out. Nice young feller, too. Name's Joe Emons. Curus cuss, too, in a way. Don't smoke, drink, or chaw. True blue, though. I only wish I could find four more like him for these hyar gyurls. But somehow the boys seem to duck out of this hyar kentry about as soon as they git into pants."

"I reckon we'll do about as well as

maw did," retorted one of the daughters, with lazy sarcasm.

When dinner was announced, my host suggested that another "thimbleful" would not go amiss. I declined with thanks, but he poured himself another half-cupful of the baneful stuff. Meanwhile, the girls sprang up with alacrity, jostled one another down the hall hilariously, with many a cuff and push, and one or two jovial oaths.

The kitchen was hot and full of flies, but cleaner than I had expected to find it. Mrs. Dirks, a frail, stooped, tired-looking woman, did not speak to me, as I remember, or give me a chance to speak to her. Nor did Dirks introduce me. He simply drew up to the table an old horse-hair chair—once somebody's parlor pride, but now a wreck—and motioned me to another one. While I cautiously lowered myself to its level and braced its legs with my own, the rest of the family found seats on whatever came handiest—soap-boxes, kegs, and even blocks of wood.

"We got somethin' fur dinner to-day, Majch, that I reckon will be a luxury to you," observed Mr. Dirks, with a touch of pride. "It's nothin' less'n young 'gator tail, and if you never et none before, you kin prepare to founder. Joe Emmons sent it over this mawnin'. Lucky thing, too, for we was plumb out of meat."

"I reckon we never yit sent a guest away hungry, Mr. Dirks," interposed his wife, sharply, as she pushed the thin, oily strands of hair from her beaded forehead.

"And never will, as long as pap kin sit on the gal'ry and shoot a deer, airly of a mawnin'," slyly added a daughter—a shot which was greeted with a burst of laughter. But Dirks was evidently a veteran to this kind of fire, and he continued, placidly, to me:

"Joe Emmons is the young man, if you'll remember, that I was speakin' of on the gal'ry. He'll be right pleased to know we had a guest to share this tail with."

A disposition on the part of the girls to harry their youngest sister on the subject of Joe Emmons brought her to my notice for the first time. She was dark, like the others, but her eye was softer, deeper, and more receptive than theirs, and did not turn one's glance like polished agate. Something else, too, set her

apart from her sisters. She met their half-malicious sallies with a dignified silence. Her glance did not waver, her face did not flush. Yet every lineament showed that she was made of finer, more sensitive stuff than her tormentors.

In a general way it is doubtless true, as Ruskin says, that it takes three hundred years to make a lady—three hundred years of working and reworking the clay of which we are fashioned. Yet it would also seem that on rare occasions Nature snatches up a handful of raw hillside stuff, blows her magic breath upon it, and, lo! there leaps into being a woman who could sit among the goddesses on Olympus and be unashamed. Such a woman, in spite of her mean parentage and squalid environment, I instinctively felt Eugénie Dirks to be. I believed then, as now, that she would have maintained her natural dignity in the glitter of a court, where her sisters would either have grovelled abjectly or put on the brazen mask of a harlot.

Hence, after dinner—at which, by the way, I did not founder on the alligator tail—I was not surprised to find that Eugénie wore shoes and stockings, and that she took no part in the raillery with which the other girls assailed one another, as well as their parents, on every occasion. Moreover, it was in her room, which I occupied that night, that I found the only pictures in the house. Poor and tawdry as they were, they took on a certain beauty in my eyes, while the few gewgaws on the packing-case, which had been converted into a dresser for her, struck a tender chord in my breast. They seemed to whisper of a soul struggling to escape from its shell into a larger, fuller, more beautiful life.

After dinner, when I reverted to the object of my visit, Dirks launched upon an ocean of anecdotes concerning the Beurnais family. When, however, I asked him if he could conduct me to the old homestead, the wind shifted to another quarter.

"Why, I could, Majch, of course. I ain't seen the place, though. I reckon, fur ten years. Truth is, 'tain't a pleasant neighborhood. When the ditches and drains all got plugged up, the water riz consid'able all around thar, so 'tain't easy to git at the house. And the skeeters—

well, to say that they air simply hell is a libel on 'em. I've seen skeeters over to'ds Burnay's [as he pronounced the name] with bills an inch long. God's truth, Majeh. Then, agin—though there ain't a drap of sup'stitious blood in me—queer things have took place at Burnay's. Women have been heerd to screech at night, and white hosses seen gallop-in' around. I don't say they was spurrits. As I said, I ain't got a drap of sup'stitious blood in my veins. I jist say it's damn curus. But, say, Majeh; if you really want to go to Burnay's, why don't you ask Genie there to take you? She knows the woods like a fox."

I turned toward the girl. From the first I had had a curiosity to sound her mind. This was impossible, of course, at the table, in the presence of her bullyragging sisters; and after they had tramped off with fish-poles over their shoulders, I found, to my disappointment, that Eugénie avoided me. I had made certain that she would eagerly welcome conversation with a representative of the great outside world; but she did not voluntarily enter my presence until Dirks and I again took up the Beurnais family. Then she slipped noiselessly on to the extreme end of the gallery, through a gap in the railing. Evidently her interest in our conversation was considerable.

"What do you say, Eugénie?" I asked.

She did not answer at once, or even look at me, though I could see the quickened lifting of her breast.

"I can't go before to-morrow mawn-in'," she finally answered.

"I should like very much to go this afternoon," I ventured, for the prospect of a night at Gad's was not alluring.

"I can't do it," she repeated, firmly.

"Has the cat got your tongue to-day?" demanded Dirks, roughly. "Why can't you go to-day?"

"Fur a good reason, and I'll say no more."

Her resolution was unmistakable, and I cheerfully announced my willingness to await her pleasure. This sugar caught no flies, however, and I failed to draw her into conversation. She stuck to her post, though, listening intently, and even resumed it after supper, and held it until a youth in a hickory hat and blue flannel

shirt strolled out of the jungle, about dusk, and paused at the puncheon gate. Then she slipped off the porch and passed gracefully down the path.

"That's Joe Emmons, the feller that sent the 'gator tail," explained Dirks, *sotto voce*, with the air of pointing out a Presidential candidate. Then, raising his voice, he called out, hospitably, "Come in, Joe, and set a while."

But the unexpected presence of a stranger had evidently abashed Joe.

"Oh, I be jist loafin' around," he answered, shyly. "Reckon I'd better be moseyin' home soon."

He tarried at the gate, however, for some time; and eventually the pair, with the elusive art of lovers, were seated on a bench around the corner of the house. They did not appear again, but after I had gone to bed up-stairs I could still hear the murmur of their voices. Finally they passed to the front of the house, and next I heard Eugénie's light foot-falls on the porch steps. At the door she called out "Good night." Something about her adieu—an unnatural loudness or a subtle insincerity—attracted my attention, and hearing no further movements of the girl inside the house, I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the front window. My suspicions were confirmed. Her pronounced "Good night" was a blind. I was just in time to see her and Joe Emmons pass out the front gate.

I lay awake for an hour or two, combating the heat and the mosquitoes, but heard nothing further below. Finally I fell asleep. When I awoke it was with the consciousness of having been disturbed by something. The full moon was flooding my room with light; the distant chant of a mocking-bird floated dreamily to my ears. Then the gate creaked, and once more I stepped to the window. Eugénie Dirks was coming down the path. Her skirts were pinned up to her knees and she wore rubber boots. I glanced at my watch. It was just half past three.

The next morning the girl showed no trace of her nocturnal adventure and loss of sleep. Indeed, she was up before any of her sisters, who had turned in about nine o'clock. Before we started on our expedition she brought out a pair of overalls and some old shoes for me to wear, saying that I would spoil my own. She

also gave me a bottle containing an infusion of pennyroyal, with which to ward off mosquitoes.

For some reason her attitude toward me seemed to have changed overnight. Her reticence was gone. As she walked at my side, with a long, easy stride that I found it difficult to match, she confided that she liked to rise early, while the dew was still on. She loved flowers, she said, and always took home and pressed every new one that she found. She knew the names of all the birds of the neighborhood except the tiny, bright-colored ones that came every spring. When I told her that these were warblers, she admitted that they might be, but was sure that she had never heard them warble; on the contrary, most of them had little squeaky voices.

"But Joe Emmons," she added, with pretty lover's pride, "knows lots more about birds and flowers than I do. He picks moss and catches 'gators fur a livin'."

After a half hour's tramp through a pitiful tract of dead, fire-blackened trees, we came to Joe's shanty. In front of it was a quantity of Spanish moss, piled in thick wet heaps to "cure," and destined eventually to go into "hair" mattresses. In a mud-hole, strongly fenced, were a dozen or two somnolent alligators, ranging from twelve inches to four or five feet in length. Outside the pen was an extra large fellow, with his jaws bound up as if he had the toothache, and his legs tied over his back. Joe was to carry him to the railroad station that day for shipment, Eugénie informed me.

Joe was not at home, but the girl entered his cabin as freely as if she were already its mistress, and proved her sweetheart's love of nature by exhibiting his collections of butterflies and moths, beetles, birds' eggs, small mounted mammals, and one stuffed rattlesnake. As a climax, she drew back a bit of chintz curtaining and revealed a shelf of worn books.

"Father Berard give him these. He's read every one of 'em through, and some of 'em four or five times. I've read most of 'em myself." She spoke with studied humility, but her dark eyes glowed proudly.

The landscape, as we journeyed on, proved dreary beyond description. Here,

one might say, was Nature at her worst. At nearly every step the water oozed from our footprints. Now we squeezed, in single file, through stifling jungles of prairie cane, the close-set stalks reaching far above our heads and forming an impenetrable wall on either side of the narrow path. Now we threaded marshes of flags and the vicious saw-grass. The numerous ponds which we were forced to skirt had no visible shore, for the rank aquatic grasses and the water insensibly merged into each other. The streams which connected these ponds were of the same character. Their bottoms were, I judged, of fathomless mud; and their viscous-looking contents were motionless except when disturbed by a startled frog, turtle, snake, or alligator.

A pitiless sun beat down upon our heads for the first hour. Then we plunged into a tract of forest so dense that one could feel the damp against his cheek. Leafless vines as thick as a man's arm encircled the boles of the trees like iron bands, or hung from the branches in knotted loops which, in the eerie twilight which ever broods over these depths, resembled clusters of serpents. No flower, no bird, broke the sombre spell, except that once I heard the nasal *yap-yap* of an ivory-billed woodpecker. Eugénie called it by another name, which I forget.

Equally weird was the scene when we glided out upon the waters of Bayou Chicot, in a boat which the girl drew from a concealed slip in the flags. The bleached skeletons of live-oaks flung out their great crooked arms and gnarled elbows above us, as if warning us back. Some of these branches were as bare as bones of the dead, in which case they were likely to form the perch of a buzzard or hawk; others were raggedly draped with the funereal Spanish moss.

A greater part of our way now, however, lay through dusky, umbrageous caverns, on water as black and smooth as a mirror of obsidian. No ray of sunlight pierced the matted vault above. Yet there was life, of a kind. The ghostly Indian-pipe, with its drooping head, glowed dully from its damp haunt. There were also giant mushrooms that might have been the tents of the gnomes with which one's fancy easily peopled this enchanted place. Sometimes, too, a sinuous ripple on the



Drawn by W. D. Stevens

IN THE GLOOM OF ANCIENT OAKS A GREAT HOUSE—DOORLESS, WINDOWLESS

water marked the hurried flight of a water-moccasin.

"It wouldn't be pleasant to strike a snag here and upset," I observed, after a prolonged silence.

"It's happened to me more'n once," answered Eugénie, calmly. "There ain't nothin' in the water to hurt you, specially, outside of cottonmouths. I think it's kind of pretty in hyar."

Her slender but muscular arms, bare to the elbow and brown as a harvest-hand's, bent in two or three more strokes. Then, with poised, dripping oars, she looked at me earnestly and asked, in her rich contralto voice:

"Why air you so anxious to see the Burnay house? It don't seem like anybody would come as fur as you have just to find some old papers."

I laughed. "You are not a historian. Old papers are often very valuable to historians. Besides, after seeing the house, I can write more enthusiastically."

She took another slow stroke or two, with a thoughtful, doubtful expression.

"Don't you expect to find nothin' else there—no money or silverware or anything like that?"

"As often as that house has doubtless been plundered, you don't imagine I'd find any valuables there, do you?"

"No. But if there *was* valuables there, would they be your'n?"

It was now my turn to hesitate. That I might find some old plate about the premises, concealed, maybe, by a faithful slave, after the family's sudden extinction, had indeed occurred to me as a remote possibility. Moreover, the girl's inexplicable absence of the night before had for some reason connected itself in my mind with my mission to the Beurnais home. Had she knowledge, I now asked myself, of any treasure in the house? But to voice this question would, of course, have been futile. So I answered:

"In the absence of heirs, and considering my position as biographer, I should say that I might honestly claim any valuables found there."

"I was thinkin' that, too," said she, slowly. "Especially as you have come from New Yawk clear down hyar. It must cost a lot of money to come so fur."

"Not so very much—about seventy-five dollars in all."

She stared at me in amazement. "Don't you call seventy-five dollars much?" she demanded. "Why"—and a slight flush overspread her olive cheek—"if me and Joe had seventy-five dollars we could git married to-morrow."

"Why can't you anyway?"

A subtle spark flashed from her eye. "Stranger, I'll tell you why. Me and Joe ain't goin' to live like hawgs, after we're married. We had enough of that already. We ain't goin' to stay in this country and have chills and fever all our life. We're goin' where we kin associate with decent people, and see something, and l'arn something. Joe ain't goin' to pick moss and ketch 'gators and parbille his feet in rubber boots forever. I'm waitin' fur him, and when he gits enough saved up we're goin' to be married and go off—a long ways off."

She eyed me steadfastly, as if suspecting ridicule from me. But the sober little figure on the seat, with the heavy oars in her hands—I was not allowed to row—was provocative of tears rather than laughter.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Will you promise not to tell pap or the girls?"

"Yes."

"Well, we're goin' up Nawth—'way up Nawth—as fur as Tennessee."

She awaited the effect of this tremendous announcement.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Has Joe anything in view up there?"

"Yes. He's got an uncle up there some'r—I forgit the name of the town—and he says Joe can git work there steady at a dollar and a half a day. I know it sounds kind of big, but that's what *he* says. He don't know, though, that Joe's engaged to me and won't go until I kin go with him. Mister," and her voice broke a little with the joy of anticipation, "I reckon that's God's country up there, shore, ain't it?"

"It certainly is," I returned; for any place is God's country compared with the Valley of the Shadow of Death in which she lived. "But why doesn't Joe go up there now and begin to save for a little home?"

"I reckon he'd ruther wait," she answered; and in her drooping lashes I found a sermouette on the Greatness of Love.

We finally landed on the low right bank, only a few inches above the water's edge, and struck out across the black, spongy humus which formed the floor of the forest. I anointed myself anew with the pennyroyal, but Eugénie refused it, saying that the mosquitoes never bothered her. Nothing seemed to bother her much. She slipped through the tangled growth as lightly as a wood-nymph, without a scratch or tear, and fluttered across the wettest places as if she had wings. My case was different. I pitched along over the treacherous footing like an elephant, butted through the viny barricades that seemed to open by magic for the girl, and ploughed ankle-deep through the mire. But at last, when I was beginning to lag, my guide halted.

"That's the place," she announced, with outstretched arm.

I paused an instant, with a quickened pulse, for now was to be revealed to the physical eye what the mind's eye had often seen. Then I stepped forward.

Stables, barns, gin-houses, slave quarters, cane-presses—outbuildings of every sort—had all been swept away as cobwebs from trodden grass. There was left of human handiwork only a great brick house—doorless, windowless, well-nigh roofless—with wide, two-storied galleries on three sides, standing in the gloom of ancient oaks and magnolias. Smaller trees, mostly gums and cypresses, which had sprung up since man's restraining hand had been removed, hugged the walls, pierced the rotten verandas, and all but blocked the wide front entrance. Yet the final touch of desolation, the sign of man's irrevocable banishment from the scene, was given by the water—the black, repellent water which submerged the grounds to the very foundation walls of the house.

"We'll have to wade the rest of the way," announced my doughty little guide; and gathering up her skirts about her slender limbs, she stepped into the water. It proved only knee-deep, however.

As I stood on the ancient veranda—or gallery, as it is called in the South—and leaned against a column that had been turned in France, it seemed as if I must have only dreamed that the sombre, silent, semi-aquatic forest before me had once been a smooth sward, the scene of many a gay fête or hushed moonlight

tryst; that the piquant, voluble, black-eyed Beurnais girls had here once practised archery, or shot still subtler arrows at targets which thrilled and quivered under the stroke; that titled Frenchmen, in the splendid livery of a century and a half ago, had sat beneath these oaks whose butts were now submerged in slime; that these dusky, umbrageous aisles, which now echoed only the raucous cry of water-fowl, the scream of a panther, or the bellow of an alligator, had once answered to the note of mandolin and guitar. It seemed like a dream that this dank, watery waste had once been the heart of a princely estate of twenty-five square miles, with a population of two thousand slaves, who supported seven negro churches; that from this spot one could once hear, all the summer day long, the cheerful thump of the loom, the stroke of the cooper's mallet, the song of the black field-hand, and could look out over vast stretches of rustling sugar-cane and whitening cotton.

Of the magnificent garden which had cost Pierre Beurnais one hundred thousand francs, only two tall stone gateposts were left. But of still more melancholy interest to me was the adjoining God's-acre, the family graveyard. Superstition had preserved it from the ravages of man, and it was still enclosed by a half-prostrate iron fence. But nature, alas! had not been so timid, and had covered the spot with a foot or two of water. Most of the stones had surrendered to this insidious foe and quietly sunk from sight; some, more tenacious, still held their heads above the water at a narrow angle, as if making a final obeisance to light and air, while not more than half a dozen retained anything like an upright position. All were as black as ebony. The bodies beneath them had turned, not to dust, but to ghastly ooze!

"I should love to decipher some of those inscriptions," I murmured to the silent girl at my side.

"You could wade out easy," she answered, softly, but in a matter-of-fact tone. "The water ain't much more'n a foot deep."

"But the bottom must be very soft," I demurred. "One would be likely to—to sink into a grave, I should think, and maybe strike a—well, a bone."

She surveyed me curiously—but not contemptuously, I think. "I reckon a bone wouldn't hurt you none. I'll go fur you, if you say so."

But I shook my head. After all, what had we living to do with those dead?

A thorough search of the house, from which even the mantelpieces and stationary sideboards and bookcases had long since been torn out by vandal hands, resulted only in the discovery of a packet of mouldy, illegible papers in the attic, far back under a fragment of roof. If Eugénie knew of anything else, which seemed unlikely from the thoroughness with which the house had been plundered, she covered her knowledge with a subtlety which entirely disarmed my suspicions.

It was late in the afternoon when we got back to the Dirks home; but in spite of fatigue and Gad's urgent invitation to tarry for a turtle supper, I walked back to Nol-

lychuckee and slept that night in the low-ceiled but spotless guest-chamber of Father Berard.

The next forenoon, as I stood waiting for the train, I saw Eugénie Dirks rapidly approaching, with a small package under one arm. Her face was flushed from either haste or excitement, so I stepped out of the little circle of natives which had formed about me and advanced to meet the girl.

"Mister," she began, abruptly, in a tremulous voice, "here's a cup of some kind. I reckon it's silver. Me and Joe found it one day, about six months ago, behind the plaster in the old Burnay house. Joe was goin' to sell it in New Awlins, so we could git married right

away and go Nawth. But he was kind of uneasy about takin' it, and said we'd better wait a little longer to see if some heirs didn't turn up. So we left it where we found it, because that was the safest place, now that people think the house is ha'nted. But when you come we was afraid you might find the cup, so we took it out night before last and hid it in Joe's shanty until we could l'arn whether you was an heir or not. Last night, when I told Joe all you had said, he said you was as good as an heir, and that we couldn't keep the cup 'thout bein' thieves. I thought so, too. So hyar it is."

I loosened the old newspaper only enough to peep at the object within,



"WOULD THAT BE TAKIN' CHARITY?" SHE ASKED

for the knot of people at the station were by this time all staring our way. I saw a heavy silver loving-cup, black from time and neglect, but beautifully chased and engraved, and bearing the Beurnais coat of arms.

"My dear child," said I, slowly, for the cup was a sore temptation to a lover of antiques, "whatever I may have said yesterday, I do not feel that I am entitled to this any more than you. And I am sure that you need it more than I."

"Tain't a question of who needs it most," she answered, severely. "It's a question of who it belongs to. If the Burnays could speak, I reckon they'd want you to have it, since you got all their papers."

"No. If they could speak, it would be for Love, not History. Take it!"

But she put her hands behind her, obstinately, and backed off a step or two. Just then the whistle of the train sounded.

"Look here, Eugénie," said I, hurried-

ly; "I'll find out what this cup is worth and send you the price. Then you'll have the money and I'll have the cup—just what each of us wants. That's perfectly fair. Will you do it?"

Under this new light, the determined lines of her face relaxed. "Would that be takin' charity?" she asked, slowly.

"Certainly not. You and Joe found the cup, or I should never have had it."

She struggled visibly to suppress any undue manifestation of joy. But when she asked, "Mister, do you suppose that cup could be wuth as much as fifty dollars?" her eyes glistened.

"I think, Eugénie, that it will prove to be worth twice that amount."

Her throat worked. She clasped her hands to still their trembling, and when she lifted her dark lashes they were wet with tears.

"Mister, Joe'll be so happy!" she choked out, huskily.

My last glimpse of her, from the car window, showed her still standing on the same spot.